As you will all know, we have a splendid but very large vicarage. While we do enjoy living in it, it does present some challenges. One is that while we have five bedrooms, we only use one of them, so the doors to the others are usually closed for weeks on end. Imagine my dismay when I discovered in one spare bedroom that not only had we had a leaky radiator that had rotted our carpet, but we also had a carpet moth infestation that had spread right through our upstairs! It really did bring home to me the words we heard this morning from Matthew’s gospel ‘Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rustconsume’! Right then I would happily have moved into our caravan with just the bare essentials to worry about! I had absolutely had enough of worrying about possessions.

Of course the other side of the story is that, given such a large house, we have spread out into every available space. I’m not sure where all the stuff has come from, but there certainly is a lot of it. I wonder whether you have made use of the extra time at home to do some sorting out this year? I hoped that I would have made short work of it all by now, but I am only just getting going! Part of the problem is not wanting to waste things. I have a whole heap of stuff that might be mended, or finished off, or repurposed. I’d like to think that I wasn't addicted to owning stuff, but I am woefully bad at getting rid of it, and Graham is not much better! There is a pair of disputed beach sandals on the floor by our back door, with a broken strap. We have reached a stalemate—I don’t think they are worth mending but Graham wants to keep them, just in case. So on the floor they stay. I wonder if this seems familiar to any of you? And it’s not just our stuff either—our son Thomas has filled one of our attics with his things he doesn’t need just now.

Is it good for us to be weighed down by all this stuff? Does it skew our priorities? Does it act like a brake when we respond to God? And in particular, does it mean we are deaf to God’s call to be generous? We really, really don’t like to talk about money in church, but the Bible has no such inhibitions. Jesus makes it clear that following him means letting go of everything, our bank balance included (and all the things in our attics, and the unsorted paperwork, and the clothes that we might grow back into one day!). He invites us to practise generosity so that we might get our priorities right, be freed of our addictions to money and possessions, and follow him in spirit and in truth.

We are invited to be cheerful givers, not acting under compulsion. When we give, we recognise that all things come from God, and are not ours to hold onto. We may have earned our savings by hard work—but only through the good gifts God has equipped us with, like good health or the privileges of being born into a prosperous society. We are not entitled or inherently deserving of anything, but we are beloved children of God, heirs of his kingdom by the saving work of Jesus. So we begin to exercise generosity by giving thanks, appreciating what we have received. We continue by opening our hands to give as we trust in God’s provision. God is not asking us to give beyond our means—but he is setting us free from all our worries about the future that make us hang onto every last penny, and every last item that might be useful oneday.

Giving is good for us! Practising generosity opens our hearts to the goodness God has given us. Giving makes us part of what God is doing in his world. Giving makes us trust God more deeply and helps us rejoice in his provision.

So why should we give in particular to the church? We might well ask, seeing as how many worthy and needy causes clamour for our attention! Well, there are a set of reasons:

· God has commanded us to, from the Old Testament teaching on tithing to the example of the early church holding all things in common in the Book of Acts

· Giving is a part of our worship, a practical demonstration of how we return to God the first fruits of what he gave us

· Giving is an expression of our commitment to the body of Jesus, the fellowship that we are gathered into

· There is a practical need to pay the minister, keep the building up, and equip the wider church!

Now due to the coronavirus pandemic over the last months, the church along with many charities has been very short of donations. Our doors have been closed, and charities have had to cancel their fundraising activities. There have been no fundraisers, no marathons, no fetes, no festivals. But of course running costs continue to mount up, and indeed may have increased for charities working with those affected by Covid 19. So today we are being asked specifically to consider what we might be able to contribute to make up that shortfall.

We begin by giving thanks for the many people who contribute to our churches in lots of different ways. Many people have taken out standing orders so that there is a predictable flow of income, and others have put aside their regular giving so that it can be passed on when they are able to get to a service. Giving takes lots of other forms too—people give generously of their time and energies, mowing the grass, arranging the flowers, doing the accounts, making jam, cleaning the buildings, being on the PCC and so much more. We praise God for all these different contributions! Alongside the support of the building, people support each other within our church community by visiting or phoning, by listening and caring, by giving lifts and offering practical help.

So much that is good! We are very grateful, and rejoice in all the giving we are surrounded by. But in a time of need, just like Paul faced when he wrote to the Corinthians, we glorify God by giving generously of our finances. Our benefice has been forced to reduce the amount it contributes to the diocesan payroll to pay for Graham’s ministry (you get me for free by the way, I am a volunteer like the rest of you!). We are feeling the squeeze—and we are one of the most generous benefices in the deanery. If we don’t pay the full cost of having a vicar, who is left to make up that cost? There is no backup fund! It will not be possible to sustain the number of clergy that we have, with the inevitable consequence that fewer people will hear the gospel.

Now some of us will also have had their income hit hard by the coronavirus epidemic, and we want to pray for you and not burden you more, but others of us will have cancelled holiday plans and gone out less, so spending less. Not everyone has sole access to their income - if you have a non churchgoing partner for you will need to put them first, but God is not interested in how much you give, but how generous you are with what you have available. From the abundance of God’s provision for us, can we donate some money where it is needed? Can we give a little more week by week, or make a one off donation?

God promises us, in Paul’s words ‘You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity’. He does not say that there is a direct relationship between our generosity and our future income, as prosperity gospel preachers insist—being wealthy is not a sign of God’s approval! But giving freely as God encourages us to do leads us into a position of trust which offers a freedom from anxiety that is beyond anything this world has to give. No bank advert can supply the security of being held in God’s hand!

So let us store up our treasure in heaven, contributing generously to God’s kingdom, through the church and through the many charities that do God’s work. May we be encouraged as we put our hands, our wallets and our time at God’s disposal. Amen

Emma Phillips